

Mildred Pierce

By Charlie Achuff

Joan Crawford came to Warner Brothers in 1943, after eighteen years at MGM, and was looking for the perfect role to complement and expand upon the star image she and that studio had spent so long building up. Disappointed in the work she had been getting at her old studio, and feeling her work unappreciated, she was now determined not only to survive, but also to mold her screen image into something beyond the glamour queen she had become at MGM. It took her years to find a part suitable to her talents and professional desires: she turned down script after script offered - typically Bette Davis rejects - and even offered to go on one-third salary until she found a role she felt worthy of her talents. Before long, she had found the perfect property. One that would not only bring her back from the dead professionally but also cement her reputation as a true actress *and* star. It even earned her the coveted Oscar statuette. The film and its central character: "Mildred Pierce." The role would leave a lasting impression on Crawford's legacy as a great mid-career highlight and it proved during wartime that women's experiences are as vital as a man's, making the film essential viewing on several levels.

Based on the bestselling James M. Cain novel, "Mildred Pierce" tells the story of a newly-divorced mother, played by Crawford, who sacrifices everything for her ungrateful daughter. Teenaged Veda is pretentious, haughty and spoiled; the opposite of her sweet, tomboy younger sister Kay. Mildred works her fingers to the bone for her girls, parlaying her expert baking skills into a waitressing job while learning the restaurant business in order to open her own pie and chicken joint with the help of playboy polo player Monty Beragon (Zachary Scott).

But Mildred's success comes at a heavy personal and financial cost. Sweet Kay succumbs to pneumonia just before the first restaurant opens. Veda, seemingly unaffected by her sister's death, grows colder and crueler as she takes full advantage of her mother's newfound wealth. She concocts a pregnancy scam to get enough money together and escape

everything that reminds her of her middle-class upbringing, of pies and grease, and of her mother's striving. Still Mildred perseveres, marrying and supporting Monty in an effort to win favor with Veda, who returns only to try and steal Monty away from her mother.

The parallels to Crawford's off-screen life were not lost on the critics of the time. A hardworking single mother strives to earn a living and sacrifices for her children in a man's business. Nor was this lost on Crawford. The actress called Mildred one of the best parts she ever had. She claimed even before reading the script that the character was one she strongly identified with, and understood that it was the best chance she had of restoring her flagging career. She fought hard for Mildred, even going so far as to take



This ad for the film appeared in the November 1945 edition of Modern Screen. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

a screen test for her own role and acting opposite potential costars in theirs. She mentored Ann Blyth in preparation for her test as Veda, and the young actress won the role. She thought Crawford “generous and caring”.

“Mildred Pierce” has taken on mythic status in recent years, particularly as a stand-in for the presumed reality of its star’s home life. It may not loom as large in the Crawford lore as her later, campy horror films, her silent flapper vehicles or that posthumous, infamous tell-all written by her daughter, but it stands solidly on its own as a brilliant showcase for a highly talented middle-aged actress many had written off as a has-been. Risen from the ashes, Crawford re-shaped her career with sheer hard work and determination. She would not go down without a fight, and she proved her staying power with this film.

Director Michael Curtiz, who at first did not want to cast the MGM glamour queen, wound up enjoying a respectful, even playful relationship with her. On their first day of shooting, Curtiz, mistakenly assuming she was wearing the enormous Adrian-designed shoulder pads he detested, took her by the shoulders and tore the dress apart. Fleeing to her dressing room in tears, Crawford assured him that she was not wearing shoulder pads, and she had in fact bought the dress off the rack at Sears for \$2.95.

Shooting began rather inauspiciously, with the company days behind schedule and no final script in hand at the start. Curtiz was hesitant to work with Crawford, whom he called (according to biographer Bob Thomas) “that temperamental bitch” and a “has-been”. However by the end of filming, so pleased was he with his lead actress’ performance that he exclaimed in his heavy Hungarian accent that he “luffed” her. At the wrap party, Crawford presented him with a gift of oversized shoulder pads to remember her by. She later told biographer Roy Newquist that Curtiz was one of the greatest directors she had ever worked with.

Producer Jerry Wald was so impressed by Crawford’s work from the start that he “let it leak” to the press that she was already under consideration for a Best Actress Oscar. He proved prophetic when, upon the film’s October 1945 release, reviewers raved about the film. Novelist Cain wrote to Crawford

personally with a note of thanks for portraying Mildred “as [he] always hoped she would be”. For Crawford, the accolades were a vindication of her faith in the role and the film’s ability to revive her career. But, as she explained to author Charlotte Chandler, she was actually more afraid of winning the Oscar (and giving a speech) than of losing.

But win she did, even though she feigned illness and had to give her acceptance speech from her bed. She would call it the happiest moment of her career, and felt that she truly deserved the statuette – as much for this role as for the dozens of others she made prior and for which she was not recognized.

Audiences, especially women, would identify with Mildred (and with Joan) because she embodied the ideal wartime spirit. She sacrificed everything she had to keep her family intact, and she stood stronger and wiser at the end of the battle in spite of the Hell she had been through. The Oscar win was Joan’s perfect end to her “Mildred Pierce” adventure. After twenty years in the business and several flops on her resume, she had “come back” at a time when it was expected she would fade into the background. Hers was the perfect postwar survival story; seldom has an actor been so well suited to a role.

The film’s closing sequence says it all. As Mildred and ex-husband Bert leave the police station after a grueling night of interrogation, the sun is beginning to rise, peeking through the clouds centered in the large archway of the station as the couple descends the staircase. The world has changed as they have changed, but there is hope in the future: uncertain, but brighter than what came before.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Charlie Achuff is an archivist, researcher, historian and writer. He holds degrees in Film Studies, US History and Library Science, and has worked at Library of Congress, George Eastman Museum, A+E Networks and Viacom. He lives in Baltimore, MD.